

Yevgeny Zamyatin: A Soviet Heretic

On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters

*Name me the final number, the highest, the greatest.
But that's absurd! If the number of numbers is infinite,
how can there be a final number?
Then how can you speak of a final revolution?
There is no final one. Revolutions are infinite.*

Ask point blank: What is revolution?

Some people will answer, paraphrasing Louis XIV: We are the revolution. Others will answer by the calendar, naming the month and the day. Still others will give you an ABC answer. But if we are to go on from the ABC to syllables, the answer will be this:

Two dead, dark stars collide with an inaudible, deafening crash and light a new star: this is revolution. A molecule breaks away from its orbit and, bursting into a neighboring atomic universe, gives birth to a new chemical element: this is revolution. Lobachevsky¹ cracks the walls of the millennia-old Euclidean world with a single book, opening a path to innumerable non-Euclidean spaces: this is revolution.

Revolution is everywhere, in everything. It is infinite. There is no final revolution, no final number. The social revolution is only one of an infinite number of numbers: the law of revolution is not a social law, but an immeasurably greater one. It is a cosmic, universal law—like the laws of the conservation of energy and of the dissipation of energy (entropy). Some day, an exact formula for the law of revolution will be established. And in this formula, nations, classes, stars—and books—will be expressed as numerical quantities.

The law of revolution is red, fiery, deadly; but this death means the birth of new life, a new star. And the law of entropy is cold ice blue, like the icy interplanetary infinities. The flame turns from red to an even, warm pink, no longer deadly, but comfortable. The sun ages into a planet, convenient for highways, stores, beds, prostitutes, prisons: this is the law. And if the planet is to be kindled into youth again, it must be set on fire, it must be thrown off the smooth highway of evolution: this is the law.

The flame will cool tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow (in the Book of Genesis days are equal to years, ages). But someone must see this already today, and speak heretically today about tomorrow. Heretics are the only (bitter) remedy against the entropy of human thought.

When the flaming, seething sphere (in science, religion, social life, art) cools, the fiery magma becomes coated with dogma—a rigid, ossified, motionless crust. Dogmatization in science, religion, social life, or art is the entropy of thought. What has become dogma no longer burns; it only gives off warmth—it is tepid, it is cool. Instead of the Sermon on the Mount, under the scorching sun, to up-raised arms and sobbing people, there is drowsy prayer in a magnificent abbey. Instead of Galileo's "But still, it turns!" there are dispassionate computations in a well-heated room in an observatory. On the Galileos, the epigones build their own structures, slowly, bit by bit, like corals. This is the path of evolution—until a new heresy explodes the crush of dogma and all the edifices of the most enduring stone which have been raised upon it.

Explosions are not very comfortable. And therefore the exploders, the heretics, are justly exterminated by fire, by axes, by words. To every today, to every evolution, to the laborious, slow, useful, most useful, creative, coral-building work, heretics are a threat. Stupidly, recklessly, they burst into today from tomorrow, they are romantics. Babeuf was justly beheaded in 1797; he leaped into 1797 across 150 years. It is just to chop off the head of a heretical literature which challenges dogma; this literature is harmful.

But harmful literature is more useful than useful literature, for if it is anti-entropic, it is a means of combating calcification, sclerosis, crust, moss, quiescence. It is Utopian, absurd—like Babeuf in 1797. It is right 150 years later.

We know Darwin. We know what followed Darwin—mutations, Weismannism, neo-Lamarckism. But all of these are attics, balconies; the building itself is Darwin. And in this building there are not only tadpoles and fungi, but also man. Fangs are sharpened only when there is someone to gnaw on. Domestic hens have wings only for flapping. The same law is true for hens and for ideas: ideas nourished on chopped meat cutlets lose their teeth, like civilized, cutlet-eating man. Heretics are necessary to health; if there are no heretics, they should be invented.

A literature that is alive does not live by yesterday's clock, nor by today's but by tomorrow's. It is a sailor sent aloft: from the masthead he can see foundering ships, icebergs, and maelstroms still invisible from the deck. He can be dragged down from the mast and put to tending the boilers or working the capstan, but that will not change anything: the mast will remain, and the next man on the masthead will see what the first has seen.

In a storm, you must have a man aloft. We are in the midst of storm today, and SOS signals come from every side. Only yesterday a writer could calmly stroll along the deck, clicking his Kodak (genre); but who will want to look at landscapes and genre scenes when the world is listing at a forty-five-degree angle, the green maws are gaping, the hull is creaking? Today we can look and think only as men do in the face of death: we are about to die—and what did it all mean? How have we lived? If we could start all over, from the beginning, what would we live by? And for what? What we need in literature today are vast philosophic horizons—horizons seen from mastheads, from airplanes; we need the most ultimate, the most fearsome, the most fearless "Why?" and "What next?"

This is what children ask. But then children are the boldest philosophers. They enter life naked, not covered by the smallest fig leaf of dogma, absolutes, creeds. This is why every question they ask is so absurdly naive and so frighteningly complex. The new men entering life today are as naked and fearless as children; and they, too, like children, like Schopenhauer, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, ask "Why?" and "What next?" Philosophers of genius, children, and the people are equally wise—because they ask equally foolish questions. Foolish to a civilized man who has a well-furnished European apartment, with an excellent toilet, and a well-furnished dogma.

Organic chemistry has already obliterated the line between living and dead matter. It is an error to divide people into the living and the dead: there are people who are dead-alive, and people who are alive-alive. The dead-alive also write, walk, speak, act. But they make no mistakes; only machines make no mistakes, and they produce only dead things. The alive-alive are constantly in error, in search, in questions, in torment.

The same is true of what we write: it walks and it talks, but it can be dead-alive or alive-alive. What is truly alive stops before nothing and ceaselessly seeks answers to absurd, "childish" questions. Let the answers be wrong, let the philosophy be mistaken—errors are more valuable than truths: truth is of the machine, error is alive; truth reassures, error disturbs. And if answers be impossible of attainment, all the better! Dealing with answered questions is the privilege of brains constructed like a cow's stomach, which, as we know, is built to digest cud.

If there were anything fixed in nature, if there were truths, all of this would, of course, be wrong. But fortunately, all truths are erroneous. This is the very essence of the dialectical process: today's truths become errors tomorrow; there is no final number.

This truth (the only one) is for the strong alone. Weak-nerved minds insist on a finite universe, a last number; they need, in Nietzsche's words, "the crutches of certainty." The weak-nerved lack the strength to include themselves in the dialectic syllogism. True, this is difficult. But it is the very thing that Einstein succeeded in doing: he managed to remember that he, Einstein, observing motion with a watch in hand, was also moving; he succeeded in looking at the movement of the earth from outside.

This is precisely how a great literature, which knows no final numbers, looks at the movements of the earth.

The formal character of a living literature is the same as its inner character: it denies verities, it denies what everyone knows and what I have known until this moment. It departs from the canonical tracks, from the broad highway.

The broad highway of Russian literature, worn to a high gloss by the giant wheels of Tolstoy, Gorky, and Chekhov, is Realism, daily life; hence, we must turn away from daily life. The tracks canonized and

sanctified by Blok, Sologub, and Bely are the tracks of Symbolism, which renounced daily life; hence, we must turn toward daily life.

Absurd? Yes. The intersection of parallel lines is also absurd. But it is absurd only in the canonic, plane geometry of Euclid. In non-Euclidean geometry it is an axiom. All you need is to cease to be plane, to rise above the plane. To literature today the plane surface of daily life is what the earth is to an airplane—a mere runway from which to take off, in order to rise aloft, from daily life to the realities of being, to philosophy, to the fantastic. Let yesterday's cart creak along the well-paved highways. The living have strength enough to cut away their yesterday.

Whether you put a police inspector or a commissar into the cart, it still remains a cart. And literature will remain the literature of yesterday even if you drive "revolutionary life" along the well-traveled highway—and even if you drive it in a dashing troika with bells. What we need today are automobiles, airplanes, flickering, flight, dots, dashes, seconds.

The old, slow, creaking descriptions are a thing of the past; today the rule is brevity—but every word must be supercharged high-voltage. We must compress into a single second what was held before in a sixty-second minute. And hence, syntax becomes elliptic, volatile; the complex pyramids of periods are dismantled stone by stone into independent sentences. When you are moving fast, the canonized, the customary eludes the eye: hence, the unusual, often startling, symbolism and vocabulary. The image is sharp, synthetic, with a single salient feature—the one feature you will glimpse from a speeding car. The custom-hallowed lexicon has been invaded by provincialisms, neologisms, science, mathematics, technology.

If this becomes the rule, the writer's talent consists in making the rule the exception. There are far more writers who turn the exception into the rule.

Science and art both project the world along certain coordinates. Differences in form are due only to differences in the coordinates. All realistic forms are projections along the fixed, plane coordinates of Euclid's world. These coordinates do not exist in nature. Nor does the finite, fixed world; this world is a convention, an abstraction, an unreality. And therefore Realism—be it "socialist" or "bourgeois"—is unreal. Far closer to reality is projection along speeding, curved surfaces—as in the new mathematics and the new art. Realism that is not primitive, not realia but realiora, consists in displacement, distortion, curvature, non-objectivity. Only the camera lens is objective.

A new form is not intelligible to everyone; many find it difficult. Perhaps. The ordinary, the banal is, of course, simpler, more pleasant, more comfortable. Euclid's world is very simple, and Einstein's world is very difficult—but it is no longer possible to return to Euclid. No revolution, no heresy is comfortable or easy. For it is a leap, it is a break in the smooth evolutionary curve, and a break is a wound, a pain. But the wound is necessary: most of mankind suffers from hereditary sleeping sickness, and victims of this sickness (entropy) must not be allowed to sleep, or it will be their final sleep, death.

The same disease often afflicts artists and writers: they sink into satiated slumber in forms once invented and twice perfected. And they lack the strength to wound themselves, to cease loving what they once loved, to leave their old, familiar apartments filled with the scent of laurel leaves and walk away into the open field, to start anew.

Of course, to wound oneself is difficult, even dangerous. But for those who are alive, living today as yesterday and yesterday as today is still more difficult.